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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000324

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: IN AL BURAIMI, FENCES MAKE FRUSTRATED NEIGHBORS

REF: A. 06 MUSCAT 1595

[1](#)B. MUSCAT 83

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo, reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Disgruntled residents of the Omani border city of al Buraimi claim that the Abu Dhabi emirate's border security and immigration controls are having a negative effect on their lives and economy. Oman has not responded with stringent border controls of its own, although the Royal Oman Police (ROP) is in the process of building a new border post on the main road between the cities of Sohar and Abu Dhabi. Residents complain that promised investments under al Buraimi's new designation as a governorate came too late to offset the immediate adverse impact of Abu Dhabi's actions. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Contacts among business and community leaders in al Buraimi, a city of approximately 70,000 inhabitants located 100 kilometers west of the Omani coastal city of Sohar on Oman's border with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), told poloff during a recent visit that they are becoming increasingly frustrated with Abu Dhabi's steps to harden its border around al Buraimi. Beginning in September 2006, the Abu Dhabi emirate halted the uninterrupted flow of people and goods between al Buraimi and the adjoining Emirati city of al Ayn, and has opened customs and immigration posts on both ends of al Buraimi's major north-south thoroughfare (ref A). According to new entrance procedures, non-citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in al Buraimi must enter al Ayn through the northern gate, which is reinforced by barbed wire fencing on either side, to have their passports checked and stamped. GCC citizens are allowed to cross through a checkpoint on the southern side of al Buraimi -- which is manned by non-uniformed officials who stop every car to check passengers' identification -- where previously there was no impediment to cross-border travel. In addition, the UAE is in the process of building a new border post and fencing just south-east of al Buraimi along the main highway linking Sohar and the city of Abu Dhabi. (Note: The Sohar-Abu Dhabi highway bypasses al Buraimi. End note.) Contacts opined that they feel encircled and cut off from al Ayn, a city with approximately five times the population of al Buraimi and historically its primary commercial and social partner.

[1](#)3. (C) Local contacts reiterated complaints made in September and October that implementation of the new border system caught them by surprise, and that neither Omani nor UAE officials have fully explained the reasons for the increased security. Many postulate that the checkpoints are intended to prevent illegal immigration and smuggling. The border region around al Buraimi is notorious as a transit point for both illegal immigrants and smuggled goods, including guns from Yemen (ref B). The ROP captain in charge of immigration and customs in the al Buraimi area estimated that his officers catch an average of 20 illegal immigrants per day attempting to transit Oman for the UAE. Noting the general

lack of transparency, however, regarding the new border measures, contacts told poloff that residents of al Buraimi perceive the customs and immigration checks to be arbitrary. Two American businessmen who work and live in al Buraimi, but daily cross the border for business and personal reasons, told poloff that they never know what to expect at the northern gate as they have waited as long as several hours, and as few as five minutes, to enter al Ayn.

¶4. (C) The government of Oman has started to increase its presence on the border of al Buraimi, although ROP contacts informed poloff that they have been ordered not to respond in kind to Abu Dhabi's measures. The ROP now operates a parallel checkpoint at the southern crossing reserved for GCC citizens, although immigration controls are considerably less stringent than those imposed by the UAE on the other side of the street. On two occasions, poloff entered Oman from al Ayn through the GCC entrance without being checked or stopped. On one of those occasions, poloff saw no sign of Omani personnel, and later was informed that Omani officials likely were on break. Oman is in the process of building a new customs and passport control post within a few kilometers of that being built by the UAE on the Sohar- Abu Dhabi highway, which would replace Oman's current post located approximately 30 kilometers from the border.

¶5. (C) Business and community leaders in al Buraimi further told poloff that the change in the border situation has dampened cross-border commerce and negatively affected the city's economy and quality of life. Sheikh Ahmad Nasser al Naimi, Chairman of al Buraimi College and a board member of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, stated that the bulk of local businesses' customers and suppliers are based in al Ayn, and the unpredictability of the border crossing and the lack of transparency regarding future developments

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make it difficult for them to plan. As a result, businesses are postponing investments and some are moving their operations out of al Buraimi. According to al-Naimi, the local housing market is weakening, and rising transaction costs involved with bringing products from al Ayn to al Buraimi markets has resulted in an increase in the price of basic consumer goods. Al Naimi groused that the Omani government did not act soon enough in designating al Buraimi as a governorate to offset the effects of the border changes, and that any new investment will come too late to boost the economy in the short- to mid-term or to keep businesses from leaving.

¶6. (C) Comment: Both Omani and expatriate contacts in al Buraimi were quick to share anecdotes of how the new border arrangements have made their lives more difficult. All seemed uncertain about the city's future, and frustrated that they appear to be stuck in a political game over which they have little control. End comment.
GRAPPO